

LEE GARDENS SHOPPING CENTER
Lyon Park
2200 Pershing
Arlington
Virginia

HABS VA-1425
VA-1425

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

LEE GARDENS SHOPPING CENTER

HABS No. VA-1425

Location: 2200 Pershing Drive, Arlington, Arlington County, Virginia. The shopping center is a contributing resource to the Lyon Park Historic District.

Significance: Arlington Building and Development Company built the shopping center in 1949 according to plans by architect Allen J. Dickey.¹ The original design was a project of architect Mihran Mesrobian's and it reflected a local preference for pairing apartment complexes with commercial centers in the second quarter of the twentieth century. In fact, between 1935 and 1942, some three hundred garden apartment complexes were erected in Washington, D.C., and its suburbs, including Arlington. The garden apartment concept oriented the apartment buildings inward, toward a courtyard, and avoided street frontage in hopes of affording pleasant views and bringing light into each unit. It was one design solution for permanent, cost-efficient, and affordable housing that was built from the mid-1930s to the mid 1950s. This shopping center was part of that planning aegis, and it was developed to serve the neighboring Lee Gardens Apartment Complex (now Sheffield Court).

Description: The shopping center is one of a handful of the early twentieth-century low-scale, companion commercial complexes built in tandem with Arlington's garden apartments that remains in the county today. The one-story shopping center was designed in an art moderne style and is characterized by light geometric lines and patterns on the buff colored limestone façades. The plate-glass display windows are ornamented by green-colored awnings.

History: During the 1930s a steady influx of people moved to Washington, D.C., and environs as part of the burgeoning federal government, working in New Deal programs and later in defense related industries in preparation for war. Arlington County was no exception. In this decade some 40 % of Arlingtonians would be employed in public service; many were commuters. As a result, residential and commercial construction projects abounded, especially in the suburbs and included a myriad of apartment complexes and what would become the neighborhood shopping center. The shopping center could be an independent venture, located near a residential community, or be part of the planned development. Such duality of purpose was encouraged by the Federal Housing

¹ Dickey's personal papers are housed in the Virginia Room of the Arlington County Public Library (RG 92). Dickey lived in Arlington, and worked in the county and in Washington, D.C. He is known for his work on the Lee Gardens Shopping Center, the Underwood Building in Clarendon (1938), and his work at the Pentagon in the early 1940s. He also designed the Wakefield Shopping Center (HABS No. VA-1279), most likely a companion to Mesrobian's 1943 Wakefield Manor.

Administration, the agency insuring many of the apartment buildings and complexes. Unlike a downtown Main Street, the neighborhood shopping centers clustered between seven to twenty tenants in one structure and offered off-street parking.²

Automobile culture defined the design for the shopping centers, assuring the presence of a parking forecourt that occupied a significant portion of the lot with one or more rows of diagonal spaces. The low-scale shopping centers were generally one story in height. The individual retail stores were contiguous to one another, each fronting on the parking lot. All of the stores had an entrance accessed directly from the lot.³

Following Arthur B. Heaton's (1930) *Park and Shop* on Connecticut Avenue were another twenty-five or so neighborhood shopping centers erected throughout the D.C. suburbs up until the United States' entry into the Second World War in 1941. The innovative *Park and Shop* served as the model for these shopping centers, both in D.C. and throughout the country as a whole, as the type emerged during the 1930s. At least eleven neighborhood shopping centers of this genre were constructed in Arlington County before the war. In fact, by 1941, neighborhood shopping centers appeared on almost every major thoroughfare in the county. For example, there were four on North Glebe Road, three on Columbia Pike, and two on Wilson Boulevard.⁴ And several of these were designed by the architect, Mihran Mesrobian.

Mesrobian, for example, provided designs for the Lee Gardens Shopping Center and the adjacent Lee Gardens apartment complex. Lee Gardens was constructed in two phases after developers Melvin Schlosberg and Fred Schnider purchased the property in 1941. The first phase was undertaken in 1941 to 1942, with FHA insured financing. Mesrobian's plans followed the popular Colonial Revival style, but with some art deco and art moderne details. Mesrobian's designs for the shopping center were finished in November 1941 but the attack on Pearl Harbor and the entry of the United States into World War II postponed the project. After the war, and after the second phase of the apartment complex was completed, a well-known local architect Allen Joyner Dickey modified Mesrobian's original design concept.

² See Richard Longstreth, "The Neighborhood Shopping Center in Washington, D.C., 1930-41," *Journal of the Society for Architectural Historians* 51 (March 1992): 5-34; Laura Trieschmann and Carrie Albee, "Glebe Center," Nomination July 2003, National Register of Historic Places, National Park Service, who cite Carl B. Rose, Jr., *Arlington County Virginia: A History* (Baltimore: Port City Press, Inc., 1976), 247-48.

³ Longstreth, 11.

⁴ Sara Amy Leach, "Mihran Mesrobian's Suburban Virginia Garden Apartments and Shopping Centers," Paper presented at Beyond the Mall, Washington, D.C., December 1994; Trieschmann and Albee, sec. 8, 6-8; Longstreth, 17, 33 (appendix).

For the Lee Shopping Center, Dickey maintained the footprint of the building keeping, for example, the parking plaza, allee, and glazed corner building. Dickey reconceived the facades in the Moderne style and included large expanses of glass. The relationship of the display-windows and parking areas, particularly in the corner building, created a three-dimensional building that engaged both pedestrians and motorists. The shopping center was completed in 1949. Today the center is identified in the National Register of Historic Places as a contributing resource to the Lyon Park Historic District.

Sources:

Leach, Sara Amy. "Mihran Mesrobian's Suburban Virginia Garden Apartments and Shopping Centers." Paper presented at Beyond the Mall, Washington, D.C., December 1994.

"Lee Gardens North Historic District," Nomination 2004, National Register of Historic Places, National Park Service.

Longstreth, Richard. "The Neighborhood Shopping Center in Washington, D.C., 1930-41." *Journal of the Society for Architectural Historians* 51 (March 1992): 5-34.

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